

Hobbies

Why the U.S. is hanging on to its most expensive coin

By Roger Boye

The Lincoln cent has received a new lease on life despite its high production cost and minuscule value.

Last year, federal officials spent \$9.23 to make \$10 worth of Lincoln pennies, the most expensive U.S. circulating coin type on a cost-to-face-value basis.

By comparison, the government paid just \$1.94 to make \$10 worth of dimes and \$1.71 for \$10 worth of quarters in fiscal 1991.

But U.S. Mint Director David J. Ryder has reported to Con-

gress that the cost of churning out cents—as well as other coin denominations—has been dropping in recent months, thanks in part to lower metal prices.

“There are no plans at the present time to change the alloys of the various denominations, or to discontinue their production,” he said in materials prepared for the House Subcommittee on Consumer Affairs and Coinage.

He added that the mint “would reevaluate this matter” if the price of copper, nickel or zinc were to rise dramatically or if “other factors change.”

Legislation in Congress two years ago would have phased out the Lincoln cent by forcing merchants to round cash sales to the nearest nickel.

Some experts believe the coin has outlived its usefulness, in part because many people throw away their pennies.

In 1982, Uncle Sam reduced the cost of making Lincoln cents by changing the metal composition to copper-plated zinc, rather than the nearly all-copper alloy that had been used for decades.

The government spent just \$5.92 to make \$10 worth of

cents in 1984, but the price has gone up in almost every year since then.

Meanwhile, the expense of producing a nickel coin also concerns some lawmakers. In fiscal 1991, the U.S. Mint paid \$8.04 to make \$10 worth of nickels out of 75 percent copper and 25 percent nickel.

That alloy has not changed since the five-cent nickel debuted in 1866, except for some copper-

silver-manganese specimens issued during World War II.

● Thousands of old coins and other money-related items will be on sale next Sunday at the annual show of the Oak Forest Coin Club. Hours are 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Alsip Holiday Inn, 5000 W. 127th St.

Club members will make free appraisals at a coin identification and grading table. Admission is \$2; free to those under 16.